

# RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

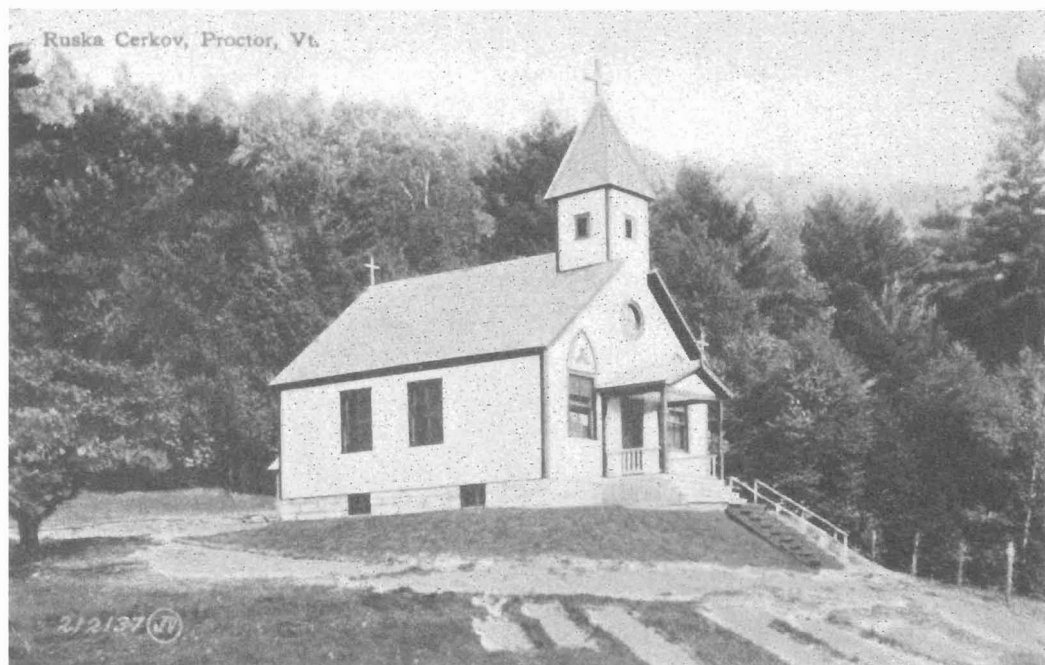
## *Quarterly*

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## A HERITAGE RECALLED

### PROROCESKOE SVIETLO



Herbert W. Johnson, Sr.

## THE PROPHETIC LIGHT

Chapel of the Greek Catholic Society, derived from the Uniate Church of Austro-Hungary, 1906-1917. The postcard reproduced here identifies it as Ruska Cerkov.

# Immigrants from Eastern Europe: The Carpatho-Rusyn Community Proctor, Vermont \*

By Paul R. Magocsi

One Sunday morning in February, 1973, during a trip to Middlebury we pulled off the road in Proctor and stopped before a group of people to ask directions. A polite old gentleman stepped forward to show us the way. When he returned to his friends, we overheard them speaking a Slavic language. Attracted by their speech, we followed them into a nearby white clapboard building where the group was headed for religious services. Somewhat familiar with the colorful rituals of Eastern Europe, we expected to find an elaborate interior decorated with saintly images so typical of Slavic Orthodoxy. But to our surprise there were no icons, no crosses, not even an altar. Such puritanical steadfastness whetted our curiosity so that we took a seat in the back of the room.

In lieu of a priest, one person stood to face the rest of us and began to read the Bible. Soon the parishioners sang a few hymns. The Bible reading was resumed, then again the singing. It became evident that the language being read and sung was Russian, but the pronunciation was hardly that of the Great Russian people of Moscow or Leningrad. Just who were these people? We eagerly awaited the end of the two-hour service to talk to some members of the group.

Afterwards the gentleman who first gave us directions on the street came up smiling, "Not going to Middlebury?" I admitted that we still planned to go, but that the language of his group and this strange religious service truly intrigued us. Upon our request, the man introduced himself as Paul Lengyel and began to tell us about his sect.

Mr. Lengyel and the six or seven other worshippers that Sunday were the last of about twenty families who had immigrated to the United States in the years just preceding and following the First World War. They came from the southern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains, an area which until 1918 was part of the Hungarian Kingdom. Old Hungary was a multinational state where Slovaks, Croats, Germans, Rumanians and Carpatho-Rusyns or Ruthenians, as well as Magyars lived. Mr. Lengyel recalled that "We Rusyns were the poorest, so we came to America to find a better life."

Most other Rusyn immigrants settled in industrial and mining centers like New York, Cleveland, and especially Pittsburgh and Scranton, Pennsylvania. The Proctor group was attracted by employment possibilities with the Vermont Marble Company and thus found its way to New England. From the standpoint of geography, there was hardly any change from the "old country" — Vermont's Green Mountains and the Carpathians being very similar — but the economic, social, and religious transformations were to be great.

If poverty was one important characteristic of Carpatho-Rusyn life in Europe, religious fervor was the other. These people were originally members of the Greek Catholic or Uniate Church, an institution jurisdictionally governed by Rome but which maintained the Slavonic liturgy, Julian Calendar and other traditional customs associated with the Eastern Orthodox Church. It was also normal for Rusyns to pay a significant portion of their income to the Church, and not infrequently local priests abused this privileged position.

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"But Mr. Lengyel," I queried, "why don't you have a Greek Catholic Church here in Proctor?" "We did," he answered, "but we had many disputes with the priest and soon decided that it would be better to have our own organization." I hesitatingly asked about the nature of these disputes. Mr. Lengyel was quite eager to explain. "In Europe we were lucky to go a year or two to school, though if you were clever even that was enough to learn Hungarian and our own Carpatho-Rusyn language. In America," he continued, "I earned sufficient money to buy a book, and my first one was the Bible. Since our families were still in the 'old country' and the duration of the First World War made it impossible for them to come here, we spent the long winter evenings reading the Bible and discussing its contents. We saw how our Greek Catholic Church, with its saints and other traditions, differed greatly from God's word and so asked our priest about this. He was evasive and suggested that we pray to him and not read 'our religious book'. It was clear to us already that there were profound inconsistencies between our Church and the Christianity as outlined in the Bible; it was only a matter of time before the break would take place."

The break actually came in 1917 when the distraught local priest thought he could head off opposition by locking the church library where the "dangerous" publications were located. The parishioners responded by boycotting mass and within a few months the priest left town. As was typical with many other Rusyn Greek Catholic parishes in this country, the Proctor congregation invited an Orthodox priest as a replacement, but he, too, felt threatened by his intellectually probing flock and got out. In essence, this began the decline of Greek Catholicism and Orthodoxy in Proctor, but not of Carpatho-Rusyn religious activity.

Mr. Lengyel and eight of his friends — Michael Livak, Frank Burch, Charles Skuba, George and Paul Kotubei, Daniel, Andrew and George Kapitan — decided to organize themselves independently. In a house on Newton Street, these fervent leaders held Sunday Bible-reading meetings, while in an adjacent garage they began to publish a monthly, *Prorocheskoe Svielo* (*The Prophetic Light*). This journal, written in Rusyn dialect and Russian, was the only Cyrillic language periodical ever published in Vermont. (The New York Public Library holds a complete set of the journal since its first issue in 1920.) The Proctor group also



Proctor Historical Society

Church of the Greek Orthodox Society into which the Greek Catholic Society then transformed when cut off from Europe by World War I. The building fell into disuse by the 1930s and was demolished about 1955.

published several religiously polemic pamphlets and a multi-volume study which proclaimed the falsities and hypocrisy of religious practices in the homeland. This last work was unfortunately lost (or destroyed) when it was sent with some fellow proselytizers who returned to Europe. From the beginning, there existed a missionary urge "to spread the word", so that small communities were established not only in the Proctor and Rutland area, but as far away as Rahway and Passaic, New Jersey, and Naugatuck, Connecticut.

Ideologically, the Carpatho-Rusyns were strongly influenced by Dr. Charles Lee, an evangelist who lectured often to Proctor's Swedish community during the early 1920s. Accepting the fundamentalist principles of Lee, the Carpatho-Rusyns tried to follow the Bible to the letter. They rejected their own colorful and in many cases aesthetically uplifting traditions, and refused to recognize any ecclesiastical authority. Rather, they tried to imitate Christian societies of the first century; man should read the Bible and through Jesus communicate directly with God. Priests, monks, churches, saints and all the other paraphernalia were considered superfluous. In modern terms, they were interested in content, not form.

Some of their practices might be considered extreme. They adopted the dietary laws of the Old Testament and gave up — despite Jesus's later dispensation — shell fish and all forms of pork. The latter was a blow to their wives since pork was always the customary food at festive occasions. But this seemed no longer necessary since festivities, even in the relatively innocent form of dancing and movies, were frowned upon as being potentially, if not actually, evil. A more serious limitation on their personal habits was the self-imposed restriction on alcohol and tobacco. Both were scorned as destructive to man. Was this a puritanical urge common to religious reformers or was it a convenient means to rationalize and help survive the depression of the 1930s?

In fact, the Carpatho-Rusyns were not preoccupied with the concept of sin to the degree that American Puritans were. Rather, God gave man life and health; the least one could do was take care of the gift. Moreover, under the influence of drink (alcoholism was a serious problem among Rusyns and other immigrant communities), an individual might commit a harmful act that could be avoided in sober moments. Thus, preservation, not masochistic self-discipline, was their goal.

Members of this sect had a particular aversion to ecclesiastical hierarchies. They detested the priest's role as interlocutor between God and man. Special wrath was reserved for Roman Catholics who, with their richly adorned churches, bingo games and other social functions, were, in the eyes of the Carpatho-Rusyns, violating the basic precepts of the Bible.

"We had some difficulty", recalled Mr. Lengyel, "when it came to the American legal system." In 1922, the Vermont Marble Company gave the sect a plot of land to hold as long as the group continued to exist. They built a church and claimed tax exemptions, but the government had to have a name and some representative body to deal with. "If we chose a name then we might be associated with an earthly organization and not with God. But the officials needed a name, so we came to be called the Independent Christian Church; they also had to have some governing board, so we reluctantly were forced to appoint five of our members." For lack of membership, that body has recently been reduced to three.

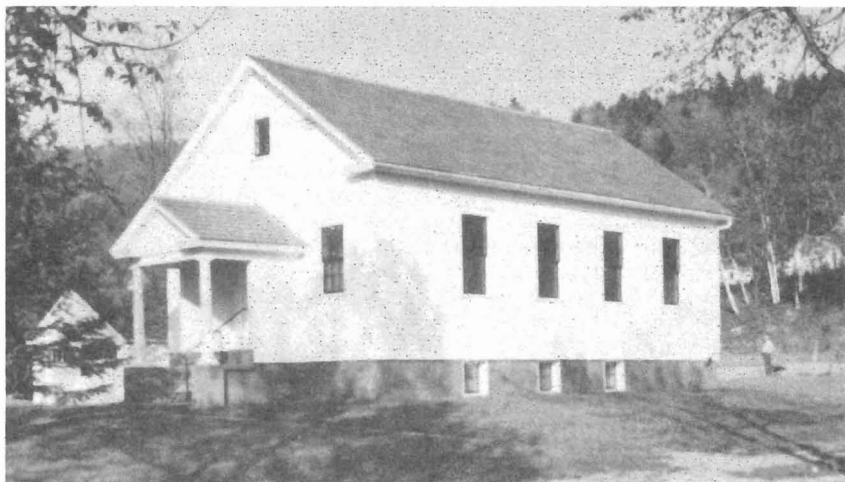
If the Proctor group was anti-Catholic, it was at the same time strongly pro-American — two ideologies which have complemented each other at various points in the history of the United States. The Carpatho-Rusyns remained deeply grateful for the opportunity to live in the New World. The original nine founders of the sect all worked in the Vermont Marble Company's plants in Proctor and Center Rutland, where they were engaged as drillers, polishers, lathe operators and copers. Their appreciation for the better life they found in this country was poignantly remembered the day we were at their religious meeting. From their hymnbook, they proudly sang *po-anglitsky* (in English) "My Country, 'Tis of Thee".

Unlike other Rusyn-Americans, those in Proctor did not become involved in political or national controversies. For instance, in 1918 their brethren in the

Pittsburgh area were instrumental in having the "old country" (Subcarpathian Ruthenia) incorporated into the new Czechoslovak Republic. Vermont's Carpathian people, however, remained isolated from these developments, as well as from the national controversies in which Rusyn-Americans were struggling to decide whether they were Russian, Ukrainian, Slovak or an independent nationality. If asked, the Proctor Rusyn would respond that he was from Hungary or Czechoslovakia and of Russian or "Slavish" nationality. Actually, all were natives of the old Hungarian county of Bereg, a territory which had a variegated political history in the twentieth century. It became part of Czechoslovakia in 1919, was returned to Hungary in 1939, and was finally incorporated into the Soviet Union (as the Transcarpathian province of the Ukrainian SSR) in 1945. Indeed, their spoken language is a dialect of Ukrainian, though in Proctor they published texts in a mixture of local dialect and Great Russian. To satisfy all linguistic tastes (and abilities), the small table we saw in their meeting hall included items written in Russian, Ukrainian, Slovak and English.

The Carpatho-Rusyn community in Proctor has managed to survive until today, but it is only a matter of time before it will be extinct. "The old people are dying off," lamented Mr. Lengyel, "and the children have moved away." This, of course, is a partial explanation. More important is the fact that fundamentalist beliefs in the Bible could neither attract the younger people nor compete with the psychologically overwhelming forces of American society. In the dispersed communities where they now live, most have been assimilated into local Protestant churches. Vermont's Carpatho-Rusyns never had the strength of other traditionalist societies like the Amish in Pennsylvania; and tucked away in the Green Mountains they lost effective contact with their national co-religionists in the New York metropolitan area. Furthermore, they avoided nationality concerns and deliberately gave up their most distinctive cultural trait — the Greek Catholic Church. As a result, the second and third generations had no particular heritage to identify with and have either forgotten, never known, or been ashamed of the origins of their parents.

But a few retired widows and widowers live on. They continue to attend their Sunday meetings and speak their native, though heavily Americanized, Carpatho-Rusyn language. Vermont gave the Carpathian immigrants an opportunity to advance economically, and in their free moments they devoted themselves wholeheartedly to spiritual matters. Their little-known experiment deserves to be remembered as both a credit to their own ingenuity and as yet another example of cultural diversity in the United States.



Herbert W. Johnson, Sr.

**The Independent Christians Chapel, built in 1937 and used by a group descended from the former Greek Catholic and Greek Orthodox Societies. Since 1980, the building has become a Masonic Hall.**





Paul E. Lengyel

### Paul Lengyel

*The following is the text of the eulogy given by Paul R. Magocsi at the funeral of Grandpa Lengyel on March 3, 1977. Grandpa Lengyel, as the previous article indicated, was a prominent member of the Carpatho-Rusyn community in Proctor, Vermont.*

We have come here this evening to bid farewell for the last time to our dear relative, Grandpa Lengyel. He would be the first, perhaps, not to want any special attention paid to him, but this characteristic request, so typical of many great men throughout history, cannot really be observed, for this simple man has become for many of us a symbol, whose way of life and ideals will be remembered long after he has passed from this earth.

In today's world, which all too often is marked by alienation, suspicion, and violence among members of our society, it is comforting to know that among us there lived someone like Grandpa Lengyel: a simple, honest man whose idealistic vision of existence might have seemed eccentric and self-defeating to some, but at the same time inspired respect and love in others.

In this land of America, which Grandpa Lengyel loved so much, we have recently witnessed the celebrations concerned with the Bicentennial of the United States. At the same time, there has occurred an ethnic revival which has led many people to want to know more about their ancestors, or, to borrow the term from the week-long television I am sure many of you saw last month, to search for their roots. Grandpa Lengyel knew very well his roots, and he tried with considerable success to pass on this heritage to his children and grandchildren.

Grandpa Lengyel was a Carpatho-Rusyn peasant from what was then Hungary, later Czechoslovakia. On the eve of the First World War, he left his homeland, never to return. With a group of friends he walked, on foot, all the way from his native village of Voloskoe to Bucharest and then on to the Black Sea where he boarded a boat for America. Not long after he arrived in this country, he went to Proctor where he remained ever since. He brought with him from the old country two Carpatho-Rusyn characteristics: love of the land and love of God.

Economic realities forced him to be separated from farming as a full-time profession, and instead he had to support himself by work in the marble industry. But we all know that in his spare time he devoted himself to his garden. I do not think any of us who were lucky to eat his corn, his raspberries, tomatoes, pickles, or sauerkraut can ever forget their taste.

His love of God was expressed differently in America. Whereas in Europe he was content to follow the precepts of the Greek Catholic Church, in this country he wanted to understand better what Christianity was all about. Hence his purchase

of a Bible and his avid reading of every word of the scripture, much of which he could recite by heart. Until he left his trailer a few weeks ago, he still had beside his bed and easy chair several Bibles and other religious literature in which he found both solace and strength. His own religious discoveries were not limited to himself; these he wanted to share, and together with several other Carpatho-Rusyn immigrants he helped to found a Bible-reading sect, whose meeting hall still stands in Proctor. He hoped that through this group it would be possible to spread more effectively the word of God.

When we think of Grandpa Lengyel, we remember a man of conviction, someone who not only believed in, but also practiced traditional morality and honesty. Moreover, he was proud of his Carpatho-Rusyn roots and hopeful that his offspring and community would love and preserve their cultural heritage. Grandpa Lengyel was living proof that such ideals could be maintained in the rapidly changing environment of our modern age.

In one sense, he is not dead. His experience on earth can be a model that will remain with us and give us strength in the years to come.

I will conclude by reading a passage from the Bible, the book Grandpa Lengyel loved so well. This is a section from Christ's Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew 6:19-34, according to the New English Bible) one of Grandpa's favorite passages which he often quoted to me.

DO NOT STORE UP for yourselves treasure on earth, where it grows rusty and moth-eaten, and thieves break in to steal it. Store up treasure in heaven, where there is no moth and no rust to spoil it, no thieves to break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eyes are sound, you will have light for your whole body; if the eyes are bad, your whole body will be in darkness. If then the only light you have is darkness, the darkness is doubly dark.

No servant can be the slave of two masters: for either he will hate the first and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and think nothing of the second. You cannot serve God and Money.

Therefore I bid you put away anxious thoughts about food and drink to keep you alive, and clothes to cover your body. Surely life is more than food, the body more than clothes. Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow and reap and store in barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. You are worth more than the birds! Is there a man of you who by anxious thought can add a foot to his height? And why be anxious about clothes? Consider how the lilies grow in the fields; they do not work, they do not spin, and yet, I tell you, even Solomon in all his splendour was not attired like one of these. But if that is how God clothes the grass in the fields, which is there today, and tomorrow is thrown on the stove, will he not all the more clothe you? How little faith you have! No, do not ask anxiously, "What are we to eat? What are we to drink? What shall we wear?" All these are things for the heathen to run after, not for you, because your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. Set your mind on God's kingdom and his justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well. So do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself. Each day has troubles enough of its own.

### **Paul Robert Magocsi**

Grandpa Paul Lengyel was a leader among the Carpatho-Rusyn group in Proctor, Vermont. His grandson, Paul Robert Magocsi, was born, raised and educated in the state of New Jersey. After completing undergraduate studies at Rutgers University (1966), Mr. Magocsi was awarded a Ph.D. from Princeton University (1972). He then went on to Harvard University, where he was a senior research fellow and a lecturer in the Government Department. Since 1980, Dr. Magocsi has been professor of history and political science at the University of Toronto. In this position he holds the Chair of Ukrainian studies.

For readers who would like to learn more about the Rusyns in Europe and North America, the following publications of Dr. Magocsi's will be of interest:

*Our People: Carpatho-Rusyns and Their Descendants in North America* (The Multicultural Society of Ontario, 1984)

*The Shaping of a National Identity: Subcarpathian Rus, 1848-1948* (Harvard University Press, 1978)

*Rusyn-Ukrainians of Czechoslovakia* (W. Braumuller Vlg., 1983)

*Galicja: A Historical Survey and Bibliographic Guide* (University of Toronto Press, 1983)

**RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY**  
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The Rutland Historical Society was founded in 1969 to preserve, study and disseminate the history of the original Town of Rutland as chartered by New Hampshire Governor Benning Wentworth in 1761, now comprised of the City of Rutland (1892) and the Towns of Rutland (1761), Proctor (1886) and West Rutland (1886). The Society maintains and operates The Rutland Museum in the historic Bank of Rutland building built in 1825, now owned by the City of Rutland, and The Vermont Farm and Rural Life Museum at the Vermont State Fair. A research library and the historical collections are maintained in the Museums and the historic Nickwackett Fire Station. Gifts or bequests of articles of historical interest or money are welcome at all times and are deductible for income tax purposes.

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